

Beth's Party: A Short Story Inspired by the Works of Virginia Woolf

An Honors Thesis (HONRS 499)

by

Andrea M. Powell

Thesis Advisor: Dr. Rai Peterson

Rai Peterson, Ph.D.
11/1/2001

Ball State University

Muncie, Indiana

December 2000

Expected Date of Graduation: December 2002

Abstract

This short story, entitled "Beth's Party," is written in the stream-of-consciousness style of Virginia Woolf's Mrs. Dalloway, and explores several of Woolf's major literary themes, such as feminism and gender roles, death and grief, sexuality and love, and sanity and mental health, in a modern context. It is the culmination of a semester-long intensive study of Virginia Woolf and her contributions to modernism at the Virginia B. Ball Center for Creative Inquiry.

Acknowledgements

I would like to sincerely thank Dr. Rai Peterson for her incredibly insightful guidance throughout this project and, further, throughout my entire experience at the Virginia B. Ball Center for Creative Inquiry. Also, many thanks are due to Dr. Joanne Edmonds for her assistance with my thesis project. Most of all, though, I want to thank my boyfriend, Yancey Carpenter, for always expressing encouragement and care for any and all of my academic endeavors.

Introduction

Imagine immersing yourself in the life and works of a single author for an entire semester, focusing every ounce of your academic energy on understanding the events of her life and the complexities of her character, reading all or most of that which she has ever written, and discovering the insights that other scholars have made regarding her and her works. In a 15-credit hour course on modernism at the Virginia B. Ball Center for Creative Inquiry, entitled "The Making of Americans," I have had the opportunity to do just that—I have submerged myself for the last semester into the world of the great 20th Century author, Virginia Woolf. Woolf and I have had an amazing journey—not to mention several struggles—throughout the semester.

I began the semester frustrated. There were so many novels and biographies and criticisms to read—would I ever get through it all? And even if I did, how would I ever understand such a complex writer as Virginia Woolf? But as I began, slowly at first with Quentin Bell's biography and the more famous novels like Mrs. Dalloway and To the Lighthouse, my interest in Virginia Woolf heightened. She was such a strong woman, I thought, as I read about her many life struggles. And so intelligent and such a gifted writer!

And then all of the sudden, I found that I couldn't think about anything *but* Virginia Woolf. I checked out nearly every book that the library owned on the topics of feminism, sexuality, the Bloomsbury group, and Woolf herself—and I wondered why they didn't have more. I spent hours pouring over criticism, finding other scholars' opinions sometimes agreeable and sometimes disagreeable, but always intriguing. Finally, I wrote a 53-page biographical criticism on Virginia Woolf's life, her novels, and the themes found in her writing.

In this project, I have used my knowledge of Woolf—and no less importantly, my emotion for her—to create a work of fiction in the style of Mrs. Dalloway and that incorporates her major literary themes: gender roles and feminism, death and grief,

sexuality and love, and sanity and mental health. "Beth's Party" is my first attempt at fiction writing since eighth grade, but by using Woolf's structure, stream of consciousness style, and themes, I have finally been able to produce a work of which I can be proud. I choose the title based on a short story that Woolf wrote years before Mrs. Dalloway entitled "Mrs. Dalloway's Party"—perhaps as a reminder to myself to someday return to Beth and expound on the events of her life.

In any case, my intensive study of Virginia Woolf has revolutionized my outlook on many subjects including feminism, sexuality, death, modernism, love—to name only a few, but it has also greatly impacted my own writing, and I hope you enjoy the fruits of my semester-long labor in "Beth's Party."

Beth's Party

Andrea M. Powell



With her usual morning groan, Beth Kramer reached over to hit the snooze button on her alarm clock. She kept her eyes shut tight for a couple of seconds, her way of resisting the inevitable transition of her mind from its drowsy haven of sleep to the active state in which it would have to function for the remainder of the day. Then she remembered, and her eyes flashed open—today was November 28th, 2010. Today was Beth's 50th birthday.

She groaned again, this time not just because it was early in the day, and sat up on the edge of her bed. It had sneaked up on her, this day. For one thing, she couldn't believe that she was 50. 50 years was half of a century. She didn't feel like she was half of a century old. She had been alive for 50 years—amazing. Beth thought of all that had happened in the last 50 years. Computers had gone from being distant and awe-inspiring to necessary and mundane. Scientists had mapped the entire human genome and even cloned several types of animals. The middle class American was no longer a factory worker but now often someone who held a master's degree. Men and women flew out into space on a regular basis. The world had transformed before Beth's own eyes in the last 50 years. But it had all seemed so gradual and natural—only now, as she looked back on all that her life had seen, did she realize the enormity of the changes.

There was another reason why the 28th of November, 2010 had caught Beth a little off guard, though. She had just found out yesterday that her family was planning a party to celebrate her birthday. It was supposed to have been a surprise, but her youngest grandniece, Julia, who was only four years old (dear god, did that mean that Beth was now a full 46 years older than Julia?), had accidentally revealed the event to Beth yesterday afternoon.

"You're going to be 50 years old, Aunt Bethie. That's old," Julia had mentioned nonchalantly on their way back from the movie theater. Beth always tried to spend time with her grandnieces and grandnephews when she was in town, and she just had taken Julia to see the latest Disney cartoon. Of course, it had been the usual type of plot (maybe things hadn't changed that much in 50 years, after all): the brave warrior rescues the beautiful, but distressed, young maiden from a horrible fate, and they marry and live "happily ever after"—or something like that.

"Mommy says that we can't put 50 candles on one birthday cake—we would have a fire. She says that Grandma will probably just get one big candle that says '50' on it, " Julia had continued.

Beth had laughed and said, "Oh yeah, Julia? So when are you and your mommy and Grandma planning to give me this cake?"

"At your party," Julia had replied quickly, as if the answer had been obvious. Then she had gasped as if she were just then remembering something very important and turned guiltily to look over at her aunt in the driver's seat.

"Oh, no," she had said slowly, "Mommy said not to tell you—it's a surprise."

Beth had reassured her that it was okay and that her mommy would understand. But Julia had already forgotten her mistake and launched into an enthusiastic and in-depth analysis of the picture that she had painted the day before at pre-school.

When Beth had returned her grandniece to her parents, and after Julia had finished recounting the plot of the movie to them and had gone upstairs to play with her two older brothers, Beth had asked her nephew, Patrick, and his wife, Samantha, about the

"surprise." Patrick had exchanged a look with Samantha, and they had both shaken their heads.

"I knew we shouldn't have told Julia," he had said to her, laughing, "Oh, well. We might as well tell you now, Aunt Beth. Mom and Dad are planning a little birthday party for you. You know how they told you to dress up for a family picture tomorrow afternoon? Well, let's just say that they have some other events planned for the evening."

"So, in other words, you two aren't going to tell me anything else about it?" Beth had asked, both teasingly and with a touch of annoyance.

Samantha had just smiled, "Did you want something to eat before you left, Aunt Beth? Or something to drink? We just picked up this new label of wine . . ."

Beth looked at the clock on the wall as she moved toward her dresser. It was 9:15. She had already wasted 15 minutes sitting there thinking about the party. She had to admit that she was just a little curious about the "events" that Patrick had mentioned. She wondered who would be there. Probably just the family: her brother, Alan, and his wife, Cindy; their oldest child, a daughter named Liza; and of course Patrick, Samantha, Julia, and their two boys, Billy and Justin. That was fine, though. She loved to spend time with her family, especially when they all were together—which had been a rare occurrence lately because of Beth's travelling.

But enough! Beth shook her head fiercely. She had to get going this morning. She had a lot to accomplish before tonight. She quickly dressed in her dark gray workout outfit and put on her tennis shoes, then climbed the stairs to her exercise studio on the third floor.

After she flipped on the overhead lights and tuned the stereo to her favorite station, Beth walked directly over to the stair-stepping machine to do her daily 30 minutes of aerobic exercise. Usually, she did an additional 20-30 minutes of strength training, but today she didn't think that she would have time. Cindy and Alan had said that they pick her up around 4:00 this afternoon, so that must be around the time that they had scheduled the party to begin. And she had so much to do before then!

For one thing, she wanted to go shopping for a new dress to wear tonight—most of the dresses in her closet were at least a couple of years old. She rarely bought clothing for herself (although she often "splurged" on her nieces and nephews, especially little Julia), but she thought that living a full 50 years constituted at least buying a new outfit for herself. And after shopping, Beth also wanted to get some work done on her current novel.

She smiled as she thought about her novel. How had she ever become a writer? She had always liked reading and writing in school, and so she had gone to college after high school to get a teaching degree in the area of English. She had always just figured that she would teach in a high school. Beth never did get that teaching degree, though, because she had dropped out of college when she had married Gerald Kramer. She had been 20 years old.

Wow—that had been 30 years ago. She had been so young. But Beth had thought that she was getting everything that life could offer her by marrying Gerald. He had been a few years older, more settled than she or any of her friends had been, and he had always seemed to know exactly where he was going in life and exactly how to get

there. Gerald had had a nice job, made a nice salary, and lived in a nice house. So, naturally Beth had agreed to marry him—what more could she have asked for in a man?

Gerald had explained to her, on more than one occasion, "So you see? There is really no reason why you should have to work. I make enough money to support us both, right? You should feel lucky to have the opportunity to do whatever you want to do with your time. Most women these days *have* to work."

So they had decided that Beth didn't really need to finish school. Besides, Gerald had wanted to have children—soon. Beth could always go back and get her degree later.

Her workout over, Beth stepped down from the stair-stepper. She wiped her face with a towel, took a long drink from her water bottle, and glanced down at her watch. It was a little after 10. Beth then hurried down the stairs toward the master bathroom. She stripped off her dirty clothes and jumped into the shower.

The hot water was soothing. She loved taking showers—long, hot showers were one of the few luxuries that she afforded herself. She imagined the water beating down on her and brutally eliminating all the tension from her body. Gerald had always hated how long it took her to shower.

He had often yelled, "Come on, Beth, that's enough! Get out of the shower. I have to pay for all the water you're wasting! Just wash yourself, for christsakes, and get out."

As she stepped out of the shower and began drying her body with her large and fluffy towel (a set of them last year's Christmas gift from her niece, Liza), Beth caught a glimpse of her naked body in the full-length mirror hanging on the bathroom door. She instantly stiffened, expecting the worse. But instead of seeing all the imperfections that

she usually noticed immediately in the mirror, like how knobby her knees were or the small pooch of fat on her lower stomach, Beth merely saw the reflection of a 50-year-old woman. She took a step closer to the door, suddenly curious about this woman in the mirror. She saw before her an older version of the young girl whom people had used to call "gorgeous," a woman who still had long, thick, dark hair (although gray strands now showed throughout) and a nice complexion, a woman who kept in shape and felt healthy, who had maintained about the same amount of a pooch on her belly for the last 30 years, a woman who wore several fine laugh lines around her mouth and her sparkling green eyes, a woman who had spent her life learning, loving, and laughing. She smiled at the image that she saw. Being 50 wasn't so bad.

But she still needed to do so much before tonight! Hurry, hurry, she told herself as she pulled on a pair of her old jeans and a gray sweatshirt. Her stomach growled fiercely, reminding her that she must eat before engaging herself in any other activity. So Beth traipsed rapidly down the stairs and into the kitchen on the first floor.

She opened the door to the large pantry and weighed her breakfast options. Okay, she could have raisin bran, shredded wheat, low-fat granola, or honey-nut oat O's . . . she finally decided on the raisin bran. Beth had always favored cold cereal for breakfast. Gerald's preferences hadn't been so simple, though. He had liked scrambled eggs, sausage links, and freshly baked bread every morning, and so Beth had cooked this exact meal for him more mornings than she could count. Of course, she would always prepare the bread the night before, though.

"Breakfast is served!" she had often sung out to a sleeping Gerald in an exaggerated British accent as she carried his breakfast tray into the bedroom almost every morning of their twelve-year marriage.

After she had laid the tray down on a nearby nightstand that they used solely for that purpose, Beth would usually nudge Gerald gently in his shoulder and say, "Gerald, it's time to wake up. I have your breakfast ready."

Gerald would then turn over to his back slowly and sit up. He would smile up at her as she placed the breakfast tray on his lap.

"Mmm . . . This looks delicious, Bethie," he would comment almost every day, "Thanks, honey."

At this, he would dig into his scrambled eggs and sausage links. But he would always save the bread for last. How he had savored that bread that Beth used to make for him. Maybe it had reminded him of his childhood or something—his mother had given Beth the recipe before they had gotten married.

Gerald would often say, "God, Bethie, you make this bread so much better than my mom does."

Then he would gaze at her teasingly and continue, "It must mean that you love me more."

Beth would have gladly told him her secret—that she added a half of a cup of honey to his mother's original recipe—but in the twelve years of eating her bread nearly every day and always commenting on how good it was, Gerald had never once asked Beth what she did to make it taste different than his mother's bread. All that had ever mattered to him was that it was there on his plate every morning and that it tasted good.

After breakfast, Beth looked quickly at the clock and realized that it was almost 11:00. The stores would be opening soon, even though it was Sunday. So she put on a heavy gray jacket and headed out to her car—a 2020 Honda Accord.

The car had been new when she bought it, but now it was beginning to show some signs of wear and tear. It was rusted in a few spots, and sometimes when she was driving, the gears would stick. Oh, well. Beth had never seen any reason to have a really nice car. If it was comfortable and reliable, it was good enough for her. In fact, she would never have bought herself a brand new car—even one as modest as an Accord—if it hadn't been for Kathleen's insistence.

Kathleen had always encouraged Beth to buy herself things. She had exclaimed many times, "You know you have the money, Beth. What are you saving it for? Treat yourself—you deserve it."

Beth wondered where Kathleen was now. She often thought about her and wondered if things could have been, or maybe even should have been, different between them. No matter how many times she had tried to dismiss it in her mind, she could not ignore that it had been such a twist of fate that they had even met. They had been introduced at Cindy and Alan's annual Fourth of July picnic for family and friends. The strange thing about the whole event, though, was that Beth had been scheduled to present her newest novel at the time at a conference two states away the day of the picnic, but her flight had been canceled at the last minute due to "electrical problems." So Beth had been forced to call the directors of the conference and cancel her presentation. It had been one of the first really prestigious conferences to which she had been invited, and she had been deeply discouraged by the cancellation. In fact, she hadn't even wanted to go to

Cindy and Alan's party, although just a few days before she had hated the thought that she would have to miss it, but Cindy had talked her into coming anyway.

"Come on, Beth. I've been worried this whole week that it wouldn't be the same without you, and now you can come. I promise that you will have a good time. Liza is bringing her new boyfriend. I have a feeling about this one—he could be the one she's been waiting for. You want to meet him, don't you?" Cindy had known exactly how to convince her. Beth wouldn't want to miss meeting her niece's new boyfriend (of course, he hadn't been "the one" at all—in fact, Beth couldn't *ever* remember Liza being seriously interested in *any* boyfriend).

After everyone had eaten, Alan had stood up in front of the guests and introduced his company's newest employee. Her name was Kathleen Banes.

Later, Cindy had led Kathleen over to Beth.

"Beth, this is Kathleen. We were just talking about her new house, and I thought since you have done such a nice job with your own house that you might have some good suggestions."

Of course, Beth had immediately recognized the familiar look in her sister-in-law's eyes—she was worried about Beth, as usual, and was trying to encourage her to forge a new friendship. Even to this day, Cindy just did not seem to understand that it was more in Beth's nature to observe other people than to become intimate with them. Further, just because Beth was alone much of the time didn't mean that she was lonely. And she wasn't really alone anyway—she had her books and her writing.

To make matters worse, Beth had lost all semblance of cohesive thought as soon as she had seen Kathleen walking toward her. Kathleen was not an average looking

woman—on the contrary, she was strikingly beautiful, with shoulder-length honey-blond hair and bright blue eyes. Beth had felt obviously out of the range of her natural personality next to Kathleen, and she had thrown Cindy a quick look of annoyance.

But before Kathleen would have had the opportunity to notice the silent communication between the two sisters-in-law, Beth had managed to sputter uncomfortably, "It's nice to meet you, Kathleen. Congratulations on the new job. What were you having trouble with—as far as the house, I mean?"

"Well, I was just telling Cindy that I'm not used to having to make all the decisions on my own. I've just come out of a long relationship, you see, and we always used to decorate the house together. So, I'm a little unsure of myself. I mean, sometimes I think that something looks good, but I have no one to ask to make sure. Does that make sense?" Kathleen had blurted out, seemingly at ease with the whole situation.

"I know exactly what you mean," Beth had surprised even herself by admitting honestly.

Cindy had taken this as her cue and had said, quite predictably, "Beth, since your plans for the weekend have been cancelled, why don't you go over to Kathleen's tomorrow and help her out."

And then she had added, with a teasing glance toward Kathleen, "I'm sure that Alan would appreciate you making his talented new employee more comfortable here in our community. I think he really wants to keep her."

"Well, I don't want to be a nuisance to anyone . . ." Kathleen had said anxiously, searching Beth's face for some reassurance of the contrary.

Beth had gritted her teeth and finally done what was obviously expected of her, "Oh, no. It sounds like fun. I'd love to come over tomorrow."

Of course, she had had no intentions of going over to Kathleen's house the next day, or ever, for that matter. As far as Beth had been concerned, the whole incident had just been something that people do at parties—they small talk and make plans that they don't intend to keep. In fact, she had felt a strange sort of relief as she left the party a few hours later and realized that she had escaped without Kathleen ever getting around to asking for her number.

The next morning after breakfast, Beth had sat down at her writing desk to work on an article for a sponsoring magazine (in those days writing literary criticism had been the primary way that she could get published). She had booted up her computer and opened Microsoft Word. But her eyes and her attention had kept slipping from the text on the computer screen to her surroundings—the tidy desk on which her computer sat, a neat pile of short stories that still needed to be read and analyzed, and the perfectly alphabetized books on the shelf across from her. Worst of all, she had kept coming back to the nearby telephone. Of course, she was too busy for friendship, she had told herself, too involved in her work.

Despite the logical protests of her mind, a feeling of undeniable sadness had begun to creep into her consciousness. Just then, though, Beth had heard the phone ring.

She grabbed for it, almost before the completion of its first ring, and grimaced immediately at what seemed to her to be an overly anxious and gross display of her current pathetic state.

"Hi, Beth. This is Kathleen. I totally forgot to get your number last night—I don't know what I was thinking! I guess I was just excited about meeting everybody and all. But anyway, I called Cindy this morning, and she gave it to me. So what time do you think you could come over? I've got a great idea for lunch."

Despite herself, Beth had replied without hesitation, and even with an element of excitement, "I'll be over in less than an hour. Where do you live?"

And that had been the beginning of an eight-year relationship. It had been so surprisingly simple to begin and, for the most part, to maintain. Beth had to admit that sometimes she missed it.

Suddenly realizing that her gas gauge was almost on "E," Beth quickly pulled over to a nearby Marathon station. After pumping her gas, she went in to the store to pay. The gas station was empty, and the man at the counter was facing away from Beth, obviously in the depths of a serious conversation on the phone.

"Please just give us another chance, Maryanne," he cried in a pitiful, anguished voice.

"I don't know what to do without you. I'm miserable. I'm so depressed all the time. I just sit around and think about you and all of the good times that we had. Please, Maryanne."

Beth wanted to hide behind an aisle or just turn and walk out of the store. She didn't need to witness this man's private soap opera. She just wanted to pay for her gas, for christsakes.

But before she could escape unnoticed, the attendant turned around and saw Beth standing there uncomfortably. With a slightly red face, he cleared his throat and said into

the phone, clearly with more authority and calm than he truly felt, “I’m sorry, I have a customer. I’ll have to call you back . . . Okay . . . Bye.”

“I’m sorry about that,” he said to Beth.

Immediately, her heart went out to this sad-looking, middle-aged man. She felt a strange feeling of connection with him as he gazed at her with such a genuine kindness in his eyes—an attribute that Beth found increasingly rare among people these days.

Automatically, Beth blamed this woman he called Maryanne for the incredible strain she saw in his face. She noticed as she paid for her gas that his nametag read “Charlie,” and the name seemed to fit him perfectly—simple and friendly. She left the store with a feeling of regret, as if she were walking out on an old friend instead of a stranger. She chastised herself for becoming too emotional in her old age as she restarted her Accord and drove on toward the mall.

A few minutes later, Beth pushed open the large doors to the Parisian department store, but as she looked around, she stopped suddenly. Had she accidentally come to a different entrance than usual? No, she finally decided, the store had just been remodeled. It had been some time since she had been here . . . almost three years, she guessed after quick consideration. She had done most of her shopping recently through catalogs and the Internet.

She’d just been so busy. Her last three books had been best sellers, and along with her new-found fame had come countless trips all over the United States signing autographs at bookstores, presenting at universities, even overseeing one of her stories being made into a movie. So when she was home, Beth liked to relax, see her family, and

take advantage of the opportunity to write in peace. And she had to admit, shopping had lost so much of its appeal after Kathleen had left.

But anyway, Beth was here to buy herself a nice outfit for her 50th birthday party, and so she started down the unfamiliar aisle toward a large sign in the distance that read "Dresses." The lingerie department stood between her and her destination, however, and as she approached, she noticed a beautiful red nightgown. Suddenly deeply enchanted, she drifted toward the delicate silk and lace garment. It was much like one that hung in her own closet—one that hadn't been worn for several years. Her's had been a Christmas gift from Kathleen on the first Christmas that they had known each other.

After she had gingerly unwrapped the gift, indistinctly sensing all along that it was special in some way, Beth had hesitantly spoken to her new friend, "It's gorgeous, Kathleen. It is the most beautiful gift anyone has ever given me . . . But you know that I don't wear things like this. What will I do with it?"

"Try it on, Beth," Kathleen had replied, and Beth had recognized a husky undertone in her voice. She had heard it a few times before, and always, it had seemed to make her feel strangely warm and anxious.

"Really? You want me to? Right now?"

"Yes, of course."

Mesmerized by Kathleen's sudden intensity, Beth had obediently begun to stand and leave the room when Kathleen touched her arm gently.

"You don't have to leave, Beth," she had whispered.

"May I help you, Ma'am?"

Through distracted, glazed-over eyes, Beth looked up at the saleswoman who had broken her reverie and shook her head. She turned around sharply and strode in the opposite direction of the big “Dresses” sign. Suddenly, she didn’t want a new outfit anymore. In fact, she decided that she didn’t want to celebrate her birthday at all. She hurried from the store, determined that she would call Cindy as soon as she got home and tell her that she wasn’t feeling well. She just couldn’t bear the thought of a party tonight.

Determinedly, lest the tears forming in her eyes should enlarge and fall, Beth started her car and drove from the mall parking lot back out to the main street toward her house. Down the road ahead of her, she saw that the traffic was stopped.

“What the hell?” she cried angrily, not at all in the mood for a further obstacle.

Just then she heard the high-pitched cry of an emergency siren and saw two ambulances zoom past her and the line of stopped traffic, along the shoulder of the road. God, she hated the noise of the ambulance—that high-pitched, pitiful wailing. She put her car in park and finally gave in to the familiar and painfully delicious feeling of sorrow that had overcome her and to the tears that fell in a continuous stream down her face. Why did she have to come upon a car accident today? She hated car crashes. She didn’t want to think about it today! Why could she not go through one single day without coming face-to-face with the guilt of Gerald’s death?

But it *was* her fault, in a way—not that he had died, necessarily, but that he had been upset that day. They had fought that morning. And Beth had started it. If only she could have just held in her anger and resentment for one more day. Then he would have died without any doubts about the perfect life that he had created for himself. That morning, though, Beth’s emotions, always so carefully guarded and measured, privately

in her mind, against those of the good and perfect wife, had simply exploded from her chest and fell, in a shower of rage, over the suddenly sickening facade of their marriage.

Gerald had been getting ready for work, and Beth had decided to go ahead and take her morning shower. Usually, she had waited until after her husband was out of the house to get ready, in order to avoid any silly arguments over her bathing habits. But that day she had been in a positive and somewhat courageous mood, and she thought, for once, that she would do what she needed to do in spite of Gerald. Sure enough, she had only been enjoying the warm water for about five minutes when Gerald started his usual tirade.

"You've been in there long enough, Beth. You know how I feel about this," he had said warningly.

Beth had rolled her eyes to herself but obediently hurried through her shower. Gerald had still been ranting when she stepped out of the bathroom. She had decided to try and reason with him—she had thought that surely he would understand the rationality of her point of view if she could just explain it well enough.

"Gerald, I just enjoy this time of the day. It's my time to relax, to prepare for the things I have to do, to clear my thoughts," Beth had stated calmly.

Gerald had looked at her with surprise, as if he couldn't believe that she had dared even attempt to justify her selfish habits. His reply had been snide, and he had meant it to end the argument once and for all.

"Well," he had said with just the slightest hint of sarcasm, "Isn't there some other way that you can 'prepare for the hard day ahead of you' without wasting all of my money?"

That had been enough—Beth had wondered, and she wondered yet today, how he could so easily and thoughtlessly downplay her entire existence in just one remark. She had turned toward him slowly and deliberately, resentment glowing in her eyes.

“And what do you mean by that, Gerald?” she had asked, her voice clear and level.

“Well, Beth, it’s just that you act like you have it so tough, when I’m the one who goes out and works for you every day.”

The patronizing tone in his voice had heightened her rage, and she had been able to hold back her long-buried emotions no longer.

“You know what?” she had spit each syllable angrily, “I don’t need you. I *can* get a job. I am perfectly capable of working. In fact, I could probably do better than you at your own job. The only reason that I haven’t finished my degree and begun a career is that you don’t want me to. Because then I would be shattering your little fantasy of the perfect couple—the man who works and supports the helpless woman. Well, it’s not my fantasy, Gerald. And I’m sorry to ruin it for you, but I want to work. I want to go back to school. And you can save all the water bill receipts from now until I finish, and when I start working, I will pay you back for all the water I have used. ”

Gerald had laughed nervously, and said in a soothing tone, “Beth, don’t be ridiculous. You don’t need to—“

“No. You’re not listening to me. I *want* a job. I hate staying in this house all day—pretending to be happy, pretending to agree with everything you decide, pretending to be the perfect image of a wife that you want me to be.”

Bewildered, Gerald had sputtered, “But you love our house—“

"I have ideas, Gerald. I have things to say to people. I want to be important. I want to write. I am more than just your *wife*," she had yelled, the last word articulated as an expression of pure disgust.

He had clearly been shocked by this confession, "But you have never mentioned becoming a writer. I had no idea—"

"That's because I can't tell you my thoughts and ideas because they don't fit the image that you want me to be. Well, it's over, Gerald. From now on, I will do what I need to do. I will express myself—and people will listen to me. No more will I let you tell me what to be. No longer will I allow you to squelch all the value inside of me, everything that I have to offer the world!"

He had just looked at her, perplexed and amazed by her sudden confessions.

"I . . . didn't mean to cause all of this by complaining about the water, Beth. Really, it's no big deal."

Finally, she had stopped her rampage long enough to notice his look of shock, and suddenly, she had felt an intense pity for this man who stood in front of her—a man whom she had once so admired for his drive and ambition, for the control and power that he had seemed to exert over his life but whom now seemed so empty, so rigid, so lifeless.

She had sighed, as if defeated, and explained in a softer tone, "I'm not happy, Gerald. I don't think that I ever have been with you. There is so much more to me than all of this."

Beth had made a sweeping motion with her hands to indicate her husband and her surroundings, and then she had gone on, "And I don't think that you are even capable of understanding what I mean."

Gerald had protested quickly, "Oh, I am, Beth. I understand. I didn't know that you wanted a job, but that's fine. We will work it out. Everything will be fine, Bethie."

When she hadn't replied, he had repeated, "Everything will be okay, right, Beth?"

She had sighed again sadly and then hesitantly moved to embrace him.

"I do care about you, Gerald. It's not that I want to intentionally hurt you," she had whispered over his shoulder.

He had squeezed her tightly and said excitedly, "Then everything will be alright, Bethie, because I love you, too. We can work it all out when I get home from work tonight, okay? We will make sure that you will be happy."

Exhausted and exasperated, she had shook her head yes and smiled weakly. And then he had glanced anxiously at his watch, grabbed his briefcase, and hurried out the door.

Beth wondered now if she would have left Gerald. She had considered the possibility, definitely. But maybe they could've worked things out. Maybe Gerald could have learned to understand and accept the person that she needed to be. Maybe she could have succeeded as a writer even with him in her life. Somehow she doubted it, though. In any case, fate had made the decision for her.

A police officer had come to her door just a couple of hours after Gerald had left for work. Of course, Beth had invited her in, but she had declined, stating stoically that she had some bad news to tell Beth. Gerald had died that morning on his way to work in a car accident.

The traffic in front of her finally started to move, and after wiping the remaining tears from her face, Beth drove home as quickly as she could. She immediately went into the kitchen and opened a can of soup. It had gotten bitterly cold outside within just a few days, but the weather wasn't the true reason that she yearned for a bowl of hot soup.

As she sat down on her couch with her soup a few minutes later, already feeling somehow comforted by the tasty and warm liquid, she noticed the light blinking on her answering machine. She quickly pressed the button to retrieve her message, mildly interested to hear who it would be. To her surprise, it was Ben Mathews, a professor whom had served as her M.F.A. dissertation advisor several years ago.

"Hi, Beth. This is Ben. I know it's been a long time since we've talked, but I just wanted to wish you a happy 50th birthday. And by the way, I am eagerly awaiting your next book. You've become quite a success all over the country, haven't you? And with good reason! I always knew you had it in you, Beth. You're a great writer. Enjoy your birthday."

Beth smiled. That was very nice of Ben. She wondered what had made him think of today being her birthday. But he had always been very thoughtful. She wondered if he had retired yet. He had already been teaching for several years when she had had him for undergraduate English classes after Gerald had died, and that had been almost 18 years ago.

Looking back, Ben had really impacted Beth's life—she owed him a lot. He had recognized her exceptional talent for creative writing the first semester that she was back in school after Gerald's death, and he had encouraged and challenged her to cultivate it. Ben had urged her to go on to graduate school and to earn her master's degree. By the

time that Beth had had to select an advisor to help her with her M.F.A. dissertation, Ben had been long-time friend and mentor to her, and he had seemed the obvious choice. Later, he had even helped her secure her first job as an analyst for a well-respected literary magazine.

So Ben was "eagerly awaiting" the release of her new novel. It seemed to Beth that everyone was pushing her to get it done. Just yesterday her publisher had called to check on its progress. She had told him that it would be done by the end of the year, and for every minute that passed, Beth became more aware of this impending deadline. She really needed to get some work done on it today.

Beth glanced at the clock on the VCR. It was already 1:15! She didn't have time for a party today, even if she were in the mood for one—which she wasn't. Beth quickly picked up the phone and began to dial Cindy and Alan's number. But something inside of her balked. It was her 50th birthday, and suddenly she knew that neither of her excuses, that she needed time to write or that she just felt sorry for herself, could really justify her staying at home by herself. She hung up the phone abruptly. She would go tonight and spend time with her family. She would go, and she would have a great time. She looked at the clock again and saw that if she didn't waste any more time worrying that she could have a good hour and a half to work on her novel before Cindy and Alan would be over to pick her up.

A few minutes later Beth was settled in her favorite writing chair with a notebook. She began working on a specific scene that had been giving her some trouble for weeks now. She had started writing it several times, but she just couldn't get it right. In this section, her main character, Sandra, was giving birth to her first child. Beth had

consciously avoided the topic of motherhood in her earlier novels, but before she had begun this one, she had decided it time to conquer the difficult subject.

It wasn't that Beth was unable fathom the birthing process—she had even witnessed first-hand Samantha's delivery of Julia. But she just couldn't relate to the emotions that her character would be experiencing as she became a mother for the first time. The closest that Beth, herself, had ever been to parenthood was a four-month pregnancy that had ended in a miscarriage.

God, she remembered how happy Gerald had been when she had told him that she was pregnant. For him, it had been the culmination of a long sought-after dream—creating the picture-perfect family. So although Beth had not felt so ecstatic about the baby, she had kept her apprehension to herself. Besides, it had seemed almost inhuman to her at the time to admit that if the decision were entirely up to her, she wouldn't ever have children. What kind of woman was she, she had asked herself so many times during that short pregnancy, to resent this beautiful creature growing inside of her? But it wasn't as if she didn't love her tiny baby, and she would have cared for the child as well as she possibly could have had it lived. Beth had just always felt something inside of her holding her back when it came to parenthood. She had always loved children, but known that they weren't for her.

In fact, it had been three years into their marriage before Beth had even allowed Gerald to persuade her to stop using birth control. Up until that point, she had tried repeatedly to explain her feelings on the topic of motherhood, but he had always dismissed her misgivings as a normal anxiousness that would go away once she became pregnant.

“Oh, Beth. You’re just a little nervous because you’ve never done it before. Relax. You’ll make a fine mother,” he had reassured her.

So finally, on their third wedding anniversary, Beth had given in to his constant pressuring and pleading. She had thought that maybe Gerald was right, maybe she was just nervous. Who had ever heard of a woman who didn’t want children? Surely, the idea of motherhood would sound better to her once she felt the baby growing inside. So she had thrown away her remaining birth control pills and proclaimed herself ready to conceive.

And to her later dismay and Gerald’s delight, conceive she had. But four months into her pregnancy, Beth had begun hemorrhaging heavily, and the baby had died, seemingly without explanation. After extensive testing, the doctors had warned the couple that to conceive again would most likely be fatal for Beth. At this news, Gerald had cried, and although she had tried to comfort him, Beth had secretly felt only relief.

Beth sighed in frustration. She’d never be able to write with any true feeling about Sandra’s experience. Oh, well, she didn’t have time to worry about it now. She flipped in her notebook to another section and began adding on to and perfecting a scene that she had started writing a few days before.

The next time that Beth glanced at the clock, she saw with alarm that it was 3:05. She jumped up with a gasp—she had to be ready in less than an hour! As she hurried from the living room toward her bedroom, she hit her knee on a small table in the hall. Dammit, why did she always forget that that table was there? She had put it there when she had remodeled the house after Gerald’s death, and since then she had bumped into it

almost every time she walked through the hall. She rubbed her knee distractedly for a couple of seconds and then ran up the stairs.

Once in the master bathroom, Beth hurriedly washed her face, curled her hair, and put on her makeup. She then took off her gray sweatshirt and her jeans and pulled on a pair of pantyhose. Now for the big decision—what to wear. Beth wished for a second that she had stayed at the mall today and bought something new, but she couldn't dwell on it now. In her big walk-in closet she saw two outfits that seemed to be promising options. One was a dark gray pantsuit with a navy blue blouse that went underneath, the other a long, gray, wool dress. She hated making choices like these.

In fact, these were the times that she missed Kathleen the most—Kathleen had always known what to wear and how to put outfits together. Her own appearance had been consistently impeccable. Even the day in the middle of the summer that Kathleen had left town, after packing and lifting all of her belongings into two moving vans all day, she had been gorgeous. Beth, on the other hand, had looked so bad that day, both due to the sweaty job of packing and to the fact that Kathleen was leaving, that someone walking by the two of them would have surely wondered what a cool and glamorous lady such as Kathleen was doing with such a frazzled mess of a woman as Beth.

Kathleen had pleaded with Beth to come with her to New York where she had secured a much more prestigious job than the one she had had at Alan's company. But even with the depressing knowledge that she would probably never see Kathleen again, Beth had declined the offer. She had been taken the role of follower in a relationship before, and she wouldn't make the same mistake again.

Beth heard the doorbell, and with a start, she quickly slid on the gray dress, deciding it to be the most comfortable option for the evening. She slipped on some shoes and a coat, checked her appearance one last time in the mirror, and hurried down the stairs to meet her sister-in-law at the door.

“You look beautiful,” Cindy greeted Beth at the front door, and then gave her a quick hug.

“Thank you. You look pretty good yourself, Cindy,” Beth replied with a smile.

“Well, we have to get going. Our appointment with the photographer is for 4:30 at our house,” Cindy said.

Beth raised a skeptical eyebrow at her and remarked, “The old “family picture” story, huh?”

“I know, I know. Samantha told me that Julia accidentally mentioned something to you about a party, but we really are getting our pictures taken, too.”

Beth closed and locked her front door, and they started down the stone walk to the car where Alan sat waiting. He waved at Beth.

“And don’t ask us any other questions about what is going on tonight. You aren’t getting any more hints,” Cindy told her sternly as they got in the car.

“How’s the novel coming along, Beth?” Alan asked, always more concerned with business than pleasure.

She sighed and replied, “Not too speedily, I’m afraid.”

“Oh, Alan,” Cindy remarked, “She doesn’t need to worry about that right now. It’s her birthday.”

When they pulled into Cindy and Alan's driveway a few minutes later, Beth saw that a few cars were already parked there. She recognized two of them as belonging to Liza and Patrick. She felt a sudden surge of excitement, giddiness almost—she was going to get to spend an evening with those whom she loved the most.

Her feeling of intense happiness only heightened as she walked into the house, and all the members of her family stood up to greet her and exchange hugs. Beth smiled broadly, genuinely, and as she hugged little Julia, she marveled that the joy she felt gurgling inside of her didn't physically overflow. This is what life is all about, Beth thought as she looked around the room at her beloved family, and suddenly she realized that she did know how Sandra would feel as she held her newborn baby in her arms. The words to describe the scene of Sandra's delivery came to her clearly now, and she knew that she would have no problem finishing it the next time that she sat down to write.

Before long, Cindy took charge, true to her usual form, and announced, "Okay, everybody. The photographer needs us all in the family room . . ."

It seemed to Beth as though he took an endless amount of pictures, but in a little over an hour, the photographer finally left, and soon Cindy called everyone into the kitchen to eat. All the food was set up on the counter, buffet-style. Beth recognized most of the dishes as specialties of Cindy's—the ham, the green beans, the corn, the bread, the macaroni casserole, and the fruit salad, and she saw that Liza and Samantha had each contributed a few side dishes to the dinner, also. Everyone loaded up their plates with food, and then the adults sat down at the kitchen table while the children went into the living room to watch television.

"I'm sorry, Aunt Beth. Justin and Billy are going through this horrible stage—they think that they have to watch TV every waking second," Samantha confessed to Beth as they sat down.

"It's okay," Beth laughed.

Just then, Justin, a mature 10-year-old who reminded Beth greatly of Alan, yelled out, "Mom, come look. Some guy killed himself today right next to Grandpa's building."

The adults all looked at each other in surprise and traipsed hurriedly into the living room, quick thoughts going through each of their minds as to ways that they could save the children from having to face the brutal reality of suicide.

But it was clearly too late. Billy, Justin, and even little Julia sat on the floor, plates full of food left untouched on their laps, with their eyes glued to the television screen. The news was on, and a beautiful young news anchor was saying, "Charles Smitt, a Marathon gas station attendant, climbed a downtown building today and threw himself from a window on the 14th floor."

Charlie! The guy at the gas station today who had argued in front of Beth on the phone with his girlfriend, Maryanne. The world around Beth seemed to spin. Why here? Here in the midst of all her happiness, was death, back to haunt her again. Dammit, why now? She strode, as if in a trance, to the nearby bathroom, unnoticed by the rest of her family who were all trying so hard, but in vain, to explain the news story to the children.

Alone, Beth slumped against the closed bathroom door. Why hadn't Maryanne wanted him? What had gone on between them? Didn't Charlie have anything else in his life to live for? Should she have stayed with him today, tried to comfort him? Beth knew

that she should be feeling some kind of pain right now, but instead she just felt numb and dumbfounded. How could this happen? Especially today.

Her eyes fixed on a picture that was sitting on top of the bureau across from her. It was an old family portrait, taken of her and Gerald and Cindy and Alan and their two children, who were very small at the time. She stood up and moved closer to the bureau. She'd seen this same picture thousands of times, both in her own house and in Cindy and Alan's, but something was different about it this time. Beth couldn't take her eyes off of Gerald—he seemed to be holding her there, telling her something. His eyes had the same earnest look in them that they used to get when he was trying to convince her of something in which he believed strongly—like that she shouldn't work or that they should have children. But unlike the times when he told her those things, she felt a sense of deep peace come over her. She held her breath for a second, thinking that this strange feeling had to pass. But it didn't, and then she noticed a bouquet of flowers that were sitting right next to the picture.

How had she not noticed them before? They were carnations--they were the most beautiful and fresh carnations that Beth had ever seen. And their colors! They were all so brightly colored—red and yellow and magenta and white and even a few blue and green ones mixed in the bouquet. She took a red one from the vase. Its color was so vibrant. She studied it intently, and her peripheral vision became cloudy, as if she were in a dream. Suddenly, she caught a glimpse of herself in the mirror holding the red flower.

Wow. She had forgotten how rich, vibrant colors so spectacularly brought out her coloring. She looked so young, so full of life standing there with the carnation. She reached up slowly and placed it in her long, dark hair. There. She was beautiful.

"Aunt Beth," Beth heard Liza call from outside of the bathroom door, "Are you okay? You've been in there for a long time."

Beth took the red flower from her hair and placed in back in the vase with the other carnations.

"I'm fine, honey," she called to her niece, and she knew that it was true, "I'll be out in just a second."

She smiled at her reflection once more and then turned and walked from the bathroom to the living room where her family was waiting for her.

The first person whom Beth noticed when she stepped back into the living room was Ben Mathews.

"Ben," she cried excitedly and gave him a hard hug, "What are *you* doing here?"

"Well, I heard that Cindy and Alan were throwing a birthday party for someone special, and I just thought I'd come see what it was all about," he teased.

"Oh, I'm so glad that you came—"

"Happy Birthday, Beth."

Beth heard the familiar voice, but she could hardly believe it. She turned around slowly—surely it couldn't be. But it was. It was her. It was Kathleen.

"Ben, excuse me for just a minute. There is food in the kitchen. Feel free to go get yourself some," Beth said apologetically.

Once Ben had agreed and started to leave the room, Beth took a quick look around, and once satisfied that no one was paying much attention to her, she turned to Kathleen and said calmly, "Hello, Kathleen. How are you?"

"I'm good . . .," Kathleen replied, with more caution than the words required, "How are you?"

Beth couldn't help but notice that her old friend looked stunning, just as she remembered her, but she surprised herself by answering with honesty and a composure that she truly felt, "I'm doing very well, thanks for asking."

"50 years, huh? That's a long time, Beth. Lot of things have changed in the last 50 years," Kathleen said.

"Yes, they have," Beth agreed.

In the silence that then befell them, Kathleen searched Beth's face earnestly for some sign of an emotional response to her presence at the party, but surprisingly, Beth realized that she felt none, that she had none to show Kathleen. She felt no more than a slight sense of melancholy for the times that they had shared.

Recognizing that she really had nothing more to say, Beth started to excuse herself, but Kathleen said quickly, "I brought a friend, Beth."

She pointed to a mousy looking woman sitting uncomfortably on the couch and continued, "I wanted her to see the quaint little town where I used to live."

Beth smiled, suddenly feeling more free and happy than she had in many years.

"That's great, Kathleen," she remarked honestly, "Have you introduced her to the rest of the family? Listen, I need to go finish my dinner and talk to Ben for a while. You

remember Ben, don't you? Well, anyway, you and your friend should stay around for a while. I'd like to catch up with you more later."

And with a broad smile, Beth turned and walked back toward the kitchen, leaving a dazed Kathleen behind. A thought struck her suddenly as she walked through the hall. That table in the hallway at home! She needed to move it. She would do that as soon as she returned home that evening.